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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S OUTCALL WITH VIETNAM'S MINISTER OF
DEFENSE (U)

(U) This cable is Sensitive but Unclassified. Not for
Internet.

¶1. (SBU) On 30 July, Ambassador Marine conducted a final call on Senior General Phung Quang Thanh, the Minister of Defense. In their discussion, the Ambassador raised a wide range of issues including high level visits, ship visits, fullest possible accounting (MIA), International Military education and training (IMET) and security assistance, Vietnam's possible support to regional and UN peacekeeping operations, bilateral cooperation on counter terrorism and legacy of war issues like dioxin and unexploded ordnance (UXO).

¶2. (SBU) On 30 July 2007 Ambassador, accompanied by the Deputy Chief of Mission and the Defense Attache, conducted a final call on Senior General Phung Quang Thanh, the Minister of Defense.

¶3. (SBU) Minister Thanh warmly welcomed the Ambassador and expressed his appreciation for his hard work during his term of service in Vietnam. He stated that the Ambassador had made many positive contributions and in this call he urged the Ambassador to share his thoughts on anything of military or non-military nature.

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador congratulated the Senior General on his recent promotion and noted this was an excellent time to have been ambassador in Vietnam, as the environment was one in which much could be accomplished. The Ambassador said that there has been progress on a wide range of large and small issues and numerous successes. He stated that during his tenure both sides had worked effectively to grow the military-military relationship in a measured, step-by-step manner. He said that this was good for the past, but now the time is right now for us to do more together.

¶5. (SBU) In reply, Minister Thanh agreed that both sides should maintain a stable, lasting friendship and develop cooperation in various fields. He echoed the Ambassador's

view that it will be mutually beneficial to further develop bilateral relations, especially the military to military relationship. General Thanh stated that he had noted improvements in education and training in Vietnam. The United States has contributed to this progress, Minister Thanh said, as well as to the economic development of Vietnam. Defense cooperation has advanced as well, the Minister continued, stating that this is very gratifying to him personally. Thanh said that, should both sides increase cooperation in defense areas, such as in the provision of training equipment, then other areas also will benefit and improve as well. He said that he personally greatly appreciates cooperation with the United States --especially since it is a nation with a strong economy and advanced science and technology. "We can work together and promote peace and stability in the region," he concluded.

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Ship Visits
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¶6. (SBU) The Ambassador then addressed a number of current and future issues related to the bilateral military relationship. One recent notable success was the visit by the USS Peleliu, whose crew had treated more than 3,000 people during its recent visit. The Ambassador informed Minister Thanh that he had visited the ship and the Peleliu Partnership medical assistance missions in Danang. He noted that Ministry of Health was the lead for that ship's visit, but acknowledged that it could not have happened without the strong support of the Ministry of Defense (MOD).

¶7. (SBU) On a related issue, the Ambassador said that the

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United States is now coordinating a visit to Danang by the USNS Bruce Heezen in late October. The primary focus of this mission will be to support the work of hydro-meteorological scientists who work with Vietnam's forecasters on warnings about impending typhoons, floods and warning for disasters. The Ambassador noted that this is also important to Vietnam's military, which has a role in search and rescue and disaster relief missions. He added that Vietnam's Office for the Search for Missing Persons (VNOSMP) will be invited to send personnel to visit the USNS Heezen, since the United States plans to use this ship, or ones just like it, for at-sea searches in the fullest possible accounting effort in the near future.

¶8. (SBU) In reply, Minister Thanh reaffirmed that MOD indeed played a "strong role" in the visit by "the humanitarian assistance ship" (referring to the USS Peleliu) and will continue to do so for future ship visits in other areas.

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Fullest Possible Accounting
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¶9. (SBU) The Ambassador then turned to the issue of fullest possible accounting for the missing from the Vietnam War. He thanked Minister Thanh for MOD's recent help with the return of an identification tag ("dog tag") to the family of a marine who was lost in the war. The Ambassador said this was a positive humanitarian gesture that truly comforted the family. He noted how important this is to our leaders as well and told the Minister that one U.S. Congressman even called to thank him for this action. The Ambassador also thanked the Minister for his Ministry's support and cooperation in this humanitarian work.

¶10. (SBU) The Ambassador then reminded the Minister that the United States will be assigning two MIA researchers to the Embassy. These two researchers have been working for years on temporary basis on the MIA mission in Vietnam. The Ambassador noted that time is running out to access eye witnesses and the older generations who are valuable

resources to help resolve the remaining cases. Having these two researchers work full-time in the Embassy will enhance our ability to continue to find answers for the families. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) already has the accreditation request, but is waiting for MOD must approval. The Ambassador asked for Minister Thanh's help with this action so we can get our two researchers in-country now.

¶11. (SBU) Minister Thanh stated that the new personnel issue of two assistant attaches would be handled through functional organizations, in this case MOD's External Relations Department (ERD), which will review the report from Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He thanked the Ambassador for all of the work the United States has done so far and hoped that the United States could share more information and any records it has with Vietnam counterparts who also are working to resolve the missing cases from Vietnam's side.

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Security Assistance
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¶12. (SBU) The Ambassador next turned to the issue of International Military Education and Training (IMET). He noted that IMET budget has doubled each year for the past two years and the IMET program is likely to continue to grow. This will allow Vietnam's IMET to expand beyond English-language training into other areas including search and rescue and military medical training, areas that both sides recognizes are valuable to Vietnam for its own forces and for any future regional support work. The two officers who

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participated in English-language training and English-language teacher training at Defense Language institute English Language Center in Texas had done exceptionally well. They were the top students in their class, the Ambassador noted. This year IMET will provide a language lab to MOD and these two officers will be able to put their training to good use to expand the English-language skills of the Vietnam officers and NCOs.

¶13. (SBU) The Ambassador reminded the Minister that President Bush changed the policy on non-lethal Defense articles for Vietnam in December 2006. We know that Vietnam desires U.S.-sourced parts for helicopters and vehicles. However, the United States can't move ahead on this issue until we have the spare parts lists, or clear information on exactly what Vietnam seeks. The U.S. Government had even worked on provisions to support the Vietnam security assistance program by considering recommendations for funds in Fiscal Year 2009, but without any movement by the Government of Vietnam now, it is difficult to move ahead with those plans. He recommended that Vietnam not limit its security assistance focus to parts, but also consider items like patrol boats, helicopters or other items that could improve search and rescue or disaster relief capabilities of the People's Army.

¶14. (SBU) In reply, the Minister thanked the United States for providing English training for the two Vietnamese officers and said that Vietnam looks forward to participation in the medical, search and rescue and demining courses in the future. He added that he is looking forward to touring the new IMET-supported language lab when it is installed at the military language school in the near future.

¶15. (SBU) Minister Thanh also acknowledged that Vietnam has not yet provided information on desired non-lethal military equipment to the Embassy, but said that MOD would soon provide the list of requested spare parts for UH1 helicopters and vehicles. He also said that MOD would like to continue cooperation on equipment for search and rescue and forecasting for floods, tsunami and disaster relief.

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PKO, Counter Terrorism and 1206

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¶16. (SBU) Ambassador then transitioned into the topic of Peacekeeping Operations (PKO). Noting that Vietnam now is poised to gain a seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), he told Thanh that Vietnam also has some very capable military forces, which could make valuable contributions to UN and regional PKO or Humanitarian Assistance/ Disaster Relief (HA/DR) missions. The Ambassador said that he knows Vietnam's military is preparing for these kinds of operations and that Vietnamese involvement is only a matter of time, but the United States is prepared to assist Vietnam with training programs to help prepare for these missions.

¶17. (SBU) In the area of counter terrorism, the Ambassador said that the United States has programs to work with friendly nations against the spread of terrorism. One of the ways to do this was with the joint Department of State-Department of Defense "1206" program. Vietnam should consider working with the United States on this program, which could provide equipment and training to counter the growth of terrorism in the region.

¶18. (SBU) Minister Thanh replied that he shares the Ambassador's hope that the United States and Vietnam can share more information on counter terrorism. He also hopes that the Defense Attaches from both nations could work on this, and especially hoped that the Defense Attache office in Hanoi would have close contacts with MOD. He said that

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Vietnam also wants to learn more about and develop the dialogue on 1206 counter terrorism cooperation as well.

¶19. (SBU) On the other hand, Minister Thanh said that he hopes that the United States will help with "terrorist cases" of interest to Vietnam like that of Ly Tong, who illegally flew an airplane into Vietnam in 2000, scattering thousands of leaflets over Ho Chi Minh City and Nguyen Huu Trang, who the Minister said had been involved in planting explosive devices in front of Vietnamese embassies in foreign countries.

¶20. (SBU) In the area of UN and regional peace operations, the Minister said that Vietnam will participate in peace operations "sooner or later, when conditions permit and when the National Assembly has provided a legal basis for such actions."

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Dioxin and UXO

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¶21. (SBU) The Ambassador thanked Minister Thanh for these comments and then noted that even in the sensitive area of dioxin/Agent Orange issues both sides have made real advances in our dialogue. Discussions and professional exchanges on this issue have been included in virtually all recent high level visits, and Presidents Bush and Triet had commented favorably on our cooperation and called for more. More delegation and meetings have occurred to share research, information and to expand cooperation. The Ambassador mentioned his recent visit to Danang where he personally observed one of the spots with dioxin contamination where the GVN, the United States Government, and non-governmental agencies including the Ford Foundation will combine forces to address remediation needs. He also noted that the U.S. Congress this year appropriated USD three million to deal with issues related to dioxin in Vietnam.

¶22. (SBU) The Minister said that he greatly appreciated the very good first steps on the Agent Orange/dioxin issue that the United States had taken, including those efforts at the Danang Airport. He also was grateful for the United States' work in demining and noted that it is very important to make the lands of Vietnam safe and to reclaim needed lands for farming and development.

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High Level Visits

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¶23. (SBU) Minister Thanh remarked that the Ambassador would be leaving shortly and the Minister wished him success and good luck in future endeavors to strengthen U.S.-Vietnamese relations. He noted that, during the Ambassador's service in Hanoi, many high-level delegations had successfully occurred, including those of then-Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, President Nguyen Minh Triet, and even the then-Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. He advised the Ambassador to urge senior officials to lead high level delegations to Vietnam. In this way, they would learn the conditions here first hand and build more understanding.

¶24. (SBU) Ambassador Marine thanked the Minister for these comments and noted that there is a high level delegation from the U.S. Congress planning a visit to Vietnam shortly. This delegation's work focused on security issues and the Ambassador hoped that the Minister could meet with this delegation personally.

¶25. (SBU) The Ambassador also remarked that Minister Thanh had not yet traveled to the United States. The Ambassador encouraged the Minister to consider a trip to the United

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States to meet his counterpart, and said that the time was right to begin planning for such a visit.

¶26. (SBU) Minister Thanh replied that he hoped Secretary of Defense Gates could find a chance to visit Vietnam as well. Minister Thanh noted that he hoped to visit the United States, but at the right time. He again thanked the Ambassador and his family for the dedicated service and contributions.

¶27. (SBU) COMMENT: The atmospherics were cordial and the discussion friendly in this meeting. Minister Phung Quang Thanh was uniformly positive in his comments. As in previous meetings, he reaffirmed Vietnam's desire to develop and expand bilateral military cooperation. On the other hand, Minister Thanh also avoided endorsing any new initiatives, or to committing the Ministry of Defense to any new areas of cooperation. The MOD continues to have one of the most cautious approaches to bilateral relations among all of the Vietnam's ministries.

Marine